

# Individualising the teaching of reading and spelling: reflections from the classroom

**Fay Tran, recipient of the inaugural Rosemary Carter Award reflects on her fifty years of teaching children to read.**

I have been teaching children to read for at least 50 years and I have never come across a child that I couldn't teach to read.

My initial training at Adelaide Teachers' College started when I was just 16. It was a two year course for infant school teachers, and I think it was a good grounding in the practical skills for teaching. The methods lecturers were all experienced teachers. We even had a speech and language lecturer who required us to learn the phonemic alphabet. Later I completed the Teacher's Diploma, B.Ed and B Sp. Ed. So along with my librarianship training and a couple of short courses, I reckon I have had at least 6 years formal training.

However, I do believe that my real training was gained through experience from working with children. Every child is different, and every student has taught me something about the learning process and how to teach.

Actually, my teacher training probably started with animals. When I was about 10, I taught our ageing cocker spaniel a few tricks like sitting and barking on command. Then when I was a teenager, I was a horse rider. Before I had my own horse, I helped with the exercising and training of a team of polo ponies. Later, when I did have my own horse, I joined a dressage

club and learnt more about teaching horses to do new things. Dogs and horses can't be trained in a group, and new skills and actions have to be taught in very small steps with lots of praise and encouragement and a firm 'No' when they do the wrong thing.

Individualising teaching has always been my priority and it sometimes got me into trouble.

During a teaching practice week at teachers' college, I wrote the required child study about a little girl who was struggling with English and was fidgety and inattentive during lessons. My conclusion was that she didn't understand what was going on and needed some individualised instruction. The class teacher was not pleased with the report, but my lecturer understood my position.

Then in my first job in a two teacher country school, I was in trouble with the district inspector because I hadn't put my Grade 1 children through a reading readiness program. These exercises were, and still are, visual discrimination tasks. I felt that it wasn't necessary because four of the five grade ones were already six and starting to read, and I was teaching the fifth on his own and he was picking up the sounds and phonics skills quite well.

After only one term, I was moved to Kingscote Area School, on Kangaroo Island, and that was a totally different teaching environment. As an isolated community, Kingscote had no special schools, no psychologists or speech therapists, and in those days, there were no integration aides either. I remember one boy who had some level of brain injury from birth and could barely talk. He also had behaviour issues because of his frustration. I realised that his difficulties were with speech rather than language or intelligence, and I was able to teach him to read and write, at least well enough for him to know that he could do it in time.

I remember that there, and in later schools, I taught the students who needed one to one teaching at my desk, and often in other lessons like art and nature study. Of course, I had to hastily cover the walls with art and produce a nature science table when the annual inspection was due.

My next appointment was at Kangaroo Inn Area School in the South East of SA. This new school had been formed by the closure of several small schools in the region and had a huge range of student achievement. We had lots of readers, all phonics-based, of course, as the school inherited the stocks of the schools that were closed, and teaching reading in groups and individually was easy. Spelling seemed to be more of a problem than reading, so I taught it also in groups, except for one boy who had to have his own program, as he didn't seem to have been taught spelling at all.

At this school a little girl taught me about the power of book therapy. She had a badly burnt hand from a cooking accident at home. While the burns had healed, her hand was severely scarred and two of the fingers were stuck together. She kept the hand covered and was reluctant to socialise with the other children. One day she showed me her reader, which had a story about a boy whose house had caught on fire and he was slightly burnt. 'Look', she said, 'This boy got burnt just like me!' That book changed this child's life. She stopped being ashamed of her injury and started to socialise with the other children. She even showed them her hand and talked about what had happened. Later I heard that she had had surgery on the hand and it was restored to almost normal.

My next move was to a department teacher-librarian course and I became one of the first primary teacher-librarians in the country. (SA leading the way as

it is now with the phonics test!). I saw my job then as matching children with books that they could enjoy, as well as advancing their skills and knowledge. Apart from the story-telling and introducing new books at the beginning of the lesson, this was also an individual teaching exercise.

The next step was a year in an Infants School in Cambridge, England. The first six months I had a reception class. The rule was that children were taught in the morning, and in the afternoons engaged in play activities in the class room, similar to our preschool activities. I broke the rules a bit by setting up reading and writing tables as well, and doing my individual teaching, while supervising the play activities. My children seemed to thrive with this arrangement and no one complained.

Then it was back to SA and being a school librarian for a few years before getting married and pregnant and having to resign, as was required in those days, and then moving to Victoria.

Of course, being a stay-at-home mum was also a learning experience. As you would expect, my three children were exposed to books almost from birth and I even remember showing a picture book to one in a crib. They all learnt to read before going to school, which did cause a few problems when they had to endure the reading readiness exercises in Prep. My son's teacher commented to me that he wasn't very good at these exercises, but I knew that he could read and was probably just not interested.

During this time a group of local mums and I set up a Montessori Kindergarten in Geelong. I didn't instigate the project, but was part of the management committee and also worked as a volunteer assistant one day a week. This was also a great learning experience. I appreciated the individual approach to learning and the emphasis on every child learning at their own pace and practising skills until mastery. My youngest child started there at two years and nine months and loved it. I still use Montessori maths equipment and phonics apps in my teaching.

When my three children were all at school, I obtained a part time position as a learning support teacher at Geelong Grammar. My job there was to work with the school psychologist, who was also a lecturer in Education at Deakin University, to move remedial teaching down from Year 5 to Year 1. Now I could indulge myself in genuine individual teaching without getting into trouble.

We called it our Early Intervention

Program and I think we may have been pioneers at this.

The first step was the screen testing of every class in reading and maths using the PAT tests, and then I individually tested any child with a low score, or about whom there were concerns. I also individually tested all children at the end of Prep and you will be horrified to learn that I used Marie Clay's Concepts About Print test, because it was the only one I could find. Of course, I added my own phonemic awareness and phonics subtests. How I taught the children, in small groups or individually, and how often, was left up to me and the class teacher. It seemed to work well, and all of our students learned to read.

In the mid-eighties we had a major crisis, when the Head of English at our Prep to Year 8 campus was given the task of converting the early primary teachers to Whole Language. LDA life member, Dick Weigall, was our Year 5 teacher and he and I, with the help of another class teacher, fought the proposal. There were many arguments at staff meetings, but we won. We convinced the staff that reading and spelling skills had to be taught. We may have been about the only school in the state that refused to become Whole Language believers. From then on the students most in need of individual attention were those coming in from other schools. Much later, about 2005, the junior school moved even further to the right and arranged for all teachers to be trained in the Spalding method.

After 25 years at Geelong Grammar I retired and became an LDA teacher.

This must be one of the most rewarding jobs there is. Every day I am sincerely thanked by parents and their children for the work I do. I know that I am making a big difference in these children's lives. However, it is also frustrating and worrying, because I am aware that these children, and many others who don't get help, are being harmed by their schools. All my students arrive for the assessment and first lessons, anxious and lacking in confidence. Some are home schooled because they just can't cope with the stress and others often tell their parents that they don't want to go to school. These are intelligent, even highly intelligent, often artistically talented children, who think they are dumb and have no future.

Gradually, with the help of lots of decodable readers, a little white board, apps and computer programs, I get them to relax and enjoy the learning process. Once they see that they are making progress, and that they can actually work out words for themselves, for both reading and writing, the main battle is won. Of course, it can take a year or more to overcome the school induced difficulties, and move them to accurate and fluent reading with comprehension. Parents sit in on my lessons and I sometimes have the mothers in tears when they recognise a turning point (that I am sure all other LDA teachers know about) and realise that their child is going to make it as a reader.

We all know that reading is a very complex skill made up of several



Fay Tran receives the 2018 Rosemary Carter Inaugural Award at the LDA AGM on 22 September. Seen here with colleague Jan Roberts, a former President of LDA, and members of Rosemary Carter's family Adrian Carter and Kathy Kang.

subskills. Every child must master all of these skills if they are to succeed, regardless of how difficult some might be to some children, and they must become automatic, so that reading words and comprehension can be managed at the same time.

Teaching is also a complex skill that is more than just choosing a method and then instructing children by following a textbook or program.

For example, I use several different sets of readers, including Fitzroy, Little Learners Love Literacy, MultiLit and a few sets published by Phonics books, and match them to the needs of each child. I often use books from three different sets in the one lesson.

I don't actually plan a lesson, but work from the detailed notes of the previous lesson, and feel my way forward with graphemes, spelling and reading, using whatever exercises, teaching aids, apps and computer programs that seem appropriate at the time.

The most difficult task is to undo the harmful teaching of previous teachers. The habit of guessing words from the first letter and context is very hard to break. The emphasis on fluency is also harmful for both accuracy and comprehension. It is difficult to persuade children to slow down in order to decode accurately, and also to reread any words, phrases and sentences that don't seem to make sense.

If I, and all the other 75 LDA consultants, can teach children to read and spell with only one hour a week, and some back up at home, why can't the schools do it with 30 hours a week?

Not teaching children to read in the first three years of school is what I would call child abuse. In fact, I believe that school principals should be held accountable for teaching every child to read. They cannot be allowed to blame the child or the parents for the failure of their staff to provide every child with the essential skills of literacy.

Thank you, Rosemary Carter, for providing a beacon of light for those of us who have followed in your footsteps.

*Fay Tran has been a Consultant member of LDA since 2011 and is a member of the Consultant Network Group in the Geelong area. She has been active in promoting effective reading instruction through her website Learning2Read, and is the author of two books, Teaching Kids to Read and Harry and the Little White Cloud, and one App, Tricky Spelling. She was the recipient of the LDA Bruce Wicking Award in 2011.*

## LDA President's Award, presented to Rosemary Carter at the LDA AGM on Saturday, 25 August 2007

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A special President's Award was made to Rosemary Carter at the LDA AGM in Melbourne on 25 August 2007 in recognition of her long and dedicated service to LDA. Rosemary has been a member of LDA since its early days as the *Diagnostic and Remedial Teachers Association of Victoria* and has made a major contribution to LDA both as a member of Council and as Convenor of the Consultants' Committee. She

was instrumental in setting up the LDA Referral Service, becoming the first LDA Referral Officer in 1991, and is well known to all members of LDA, and particularly to our Consultant members. She is held in high regard not only by our members but by those outside of LDA who have appreciated her advice, support and professionalism in all matters relating to provision of services for those with learning difficulties. Our congratulations to Rosemary for this well-deserved award.